

VZCZCXYZ0026
PP RUEHWEB

DE RUEHDG #0263/01 0251549
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 251549Z JAN 06
FM AMEMBASSY SANTO DOMINGO
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 3274
INFO RUEHZA/WHA CENTRAL AMERICAN COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHBR/AMEMBASSY BRASILIA PRIORITY 0219
RUEHWN/AMEMBASSY BRIDGETOWN PRIORITY 1844
RUEHKG/AMEMBASSY KINGSTON PRIORITY 2498
RUEHPU/AMEMBASSY PORT AU PRINCE PRIORITY 4080
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEAHLC/HQS DHS WASHDC PRIORITY
RUCOWCV/CUSTOMS CARIBBEAN ATTACHE MIAMI FL PRIORITY
RUMISTA/CDR USSOUTHCOM MIAMI FL PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SANTO DOMINGO 000263

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

STATE FOR WHA/CAR DSEARBY
STATE PLEASE PASS TO USAID

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/18/2015

TAGS: DR KDEM PGOV PREL

SUBJECT: DOMINICAN ELECTION BOARD CHIEF ON ELECTORAL
PREPARATIONS, ELECTRONIC VOTING

Classified By: Poloff Michael Garuckis. Reason: 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (U) Summary. Dominican Central Electoral Board president Luis Arias told the Ambassador on January 18 that civil society criticism of a proposal to use 500 Brazilian-produced electronic voting machines is misguided. Arias welcomes the prospect of international observation of the election and deplored the negative impact of budget cuts on non-election programming. End summary.

Electronic Voting

¶2. (U) As the campaign for the May 16 congressional and municipal elections heats up, Participacion Ciudadana (PC), a leading transparency NGO, publicly denounced plans of the Central Electoral Board (JCE) to introduce 500 Brazilian-made electronic voting machines into the election process. In private conversations with Embassy officers, PC has challenged the machines as technologically flawed, lacking both color monitors (useful for illiterates who vote by party color) and a paper back-up system, and dangerously dependent on the country's irregular power supply. More recently, based on results of a January 15 PLD internal primary election using the machines, PC asserted that their use in the general election would confuse voters and threaten the overall integrity of the voting. Most voters in the primary were reportedly unable to use the machines without assistance by poll workers.

¶3. (U) The suitability of electronic voting figured prominently in a January 18 meeting between the Ambassador and JCE President Luis Arias. Arias described the machines as part of a "pilot project" and noted that they were being loaned at little cost by a Brazilian consortium in a deal brokered by the OAS. The JCE's current obligation is to pay only for shipping the equipment and feeding and lodging various Brazilian technicians and trainers. In response to rumors that the machines are simply an entree for a massive, non-transparent, and as yet undisclosed purchase of equipment and technology, Arias said there is no agreement to procure these or any other machines. Moreover, he said, the 500 loaned machines would be used in the May election only if the

three major political parties agree.

¶4. (U) Arias accepted as valid PC reports that many PLD primary voters could not independently use the electronic voting machines, but countered that such problems would be resolved by an extensive educative and training program in advance of the May election. Contradicting what civil society representatives have told the Embassy, Arias said that the machines have color monitors and paper back-up and will have dedicated back-up power sources installed at the polling sites. He offered to demonstrate the machines to Embassy officers. We subsequently recommended to the JCE that it invite the diplomatic corps in Santo Domingo and leading NGOs. This event is tentatively set for February 16.

¶5. (U) Comment: Embassy notes that there is no announced plan to train poll workers in this technology and that routine preparations for the upcoming elections are behind schedule. If, in fact, the machines use color screens, have paper back-up and a dedicated power supply, and receive the blessing of the three major political parties, then if their use is preceded by a so far hypothetical public education and training program, their benefits may be substantial in terms of speed, accuracy, and transparency. Absent these prerequisites, political parties that find themselves losing the election would probably join with the NGOs to challenge the election's legitimacy. End comment.

International Observation

¶6. (U) Arias strongly supported the general practice of international observation. He said that "all interested international organizations," as well as members of the diplomatic community, would be invited to observe the May congressional and municipal elections. In particular, he singled out the work of the U.S.-based Carter Center for special praise. He further noted that as a member state of the Tikal Protocol, the Dominican Republic would invite observers from the electoral tribunals of Central America (including Panama, but omitting Mexico), Puerto Rico, the Jamaica, Saint Lucia, and Antigua and Barbuda.

Budget Woes

¶7. (C) Despite a significant reduction of the JCE's budget request, Arias predicted adequate funding for the May election. The current congressionally proposed budget line-item for the JCE provides approximately 2.4 billion pesos (USD 68 million), but falls short of the JCE request by roughly 1 billion pesos (USD 28.4 million). Arias has repeatedly declared in public that reduced funding for the JCE will jeopardize efficiency of the election, but he privately assured the Ambassador that the JCE would guarantee adequate electoral funding by shifting internal accounts. However, Arias said the shifting of resources would cripple efforts to modernize the Dominican Republic's civil registry. After this meeting, the Ambassador told news reporters, "The budget is a theme that you must resolve and we hope that it is given the priority it deserves in a democracy and in a process as important as the upcoming elections." (Comment: Modernization of the civil registry is critical to voter registration. Currently lax controls permit corruption and leave personal identity documents vulnerable to loss through accidental destruction or theft. End comment.)

Next Steps

¶8. (U) To help ensure that the elections are free, fair, and transparent, the Embassy will participate in the scheduled demonstration of the electronic voting machines and will continue to work with PC and other NGOs to gauge reaction to

the machines' introduction. The Embassy aims for a unified diplomatic approach to international observation and budgeting issues and expects to hold an elections strategy meeting with like-minded members of the diplomatic community in the near future.

HERTELL